DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 094 176 CE 001 695

TITLE Why Women Work.
INSTITUTION Employment Standards Administration (DOL), Washington, D.C. Women's Bureau.
PUB DATE Jun 73
NOTE 2p.; For an earlier report see ED 014 590

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Economically Disadvantaged; Economic Change; Economic Status; *Employment Statistics; Heads of Households; Labor Force; Low Income; *Marital Status; Minority Groups; One Parent Family; *Working Women

ABSTRACT

Decisions by individual women to seek employment outside the home are usually based on economic reasons. Most women in the labor force work because their families need the money they can earn--some work to raise family living standards above the low-income or poverty level; others, to help meet rising costs of food and education for their children, medical care, and the like. Statistics are given about women in the labor force who are the heads of families, mothers with husbands present in the home, wives whose husbands are unemployed or unable to work, and women whose husbands are employed in low-wage occupations. Also included is a table on the marital status of women workers in March 1972. (BP)

ED 094176

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS ADMINISTRATION
WOMEN'S BUREAU
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20210

WHY WOMEN WORK

More than 33 million women are in the labor force today because their talents and skills are needed by the American economy. The development of new industries and expansion of other industries have opened new doors for women in business, in the professions, and in the production of goods and services.

Decisions of individual women to seek employment outside the home are usually based on economic reasons. Most women in the labor force work because they or their families need the money they can earn--some work to raise family living standards above the low-income or poverty level; others, to help meet rising costs of food, education for their children, medical care, and the like. The majority of women do not have the option of working solely for personal fulfillment.

Millions of the women who were in the labor force in March 1972 worked to support themselves or others. This was true of most of the 7.5 million single women workers. Nearly all the 6.2 million women workers who were widowed, divorced, or separated from their husbands--particularly the women who were also raising children--were working for compelling economic reasons. In addition, the 4.1 million married women workers whose husbands had incomes below $5,000 in 1971 almost certainly worked because of economic need. Finally, about 3 million women would be added if we take into account those women whose husbands had incomes between $5,000 and $7,000--incomes below the $7,200 estimated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for a low standard of living for an urban family of four.

The marital status of women workers in March 1972 was as follows:

Marital status	All women		Women of minority races	
	Number	Percent distribution	Number	Percent distribution
Total	32,939,000	100.0	4,176,000	100.0
Single	7,477,000	22.7	920,000	22.0
Married (husband present)	19,249,000	58.5	1,991,000	47.7
Husband's 1971 income:				
Below $3,000	1,925,000	5.8	281,000	6.7
$3,000 - $4,999	2,194,000	6.7	394,000	9.4
$5,000 - $6,999	2,926,000	8.9	406,000	9.7
$7,000 and over	12,204,000	37.1	910,000	21.8
Other marital status	6,213,000	18.9	1,265,000	30.3
Married (husband absent)	1,500,000	4.6	538,000	12.9
Widowed	2,570,000	7.8	412,000	9.9
Divorced	2,143,000	6.5	315,000	7.5

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Among the 4.2 million women of minority races who were workers in March 1972, slightly more than half (52 percent) were single, widowed, divorced, or separated from their husbands; about one-sixth (16 percent) were wives whose husbands had 1971 incomes below $5,000. In fact, only 22 percent of all women workers of minority races were wives whose husbands had incomes of $7,000 or more.

Women heads of families.--Of the 53.3 million families in March 1972, 6.2 million were headed by women. About 3.3 million, or 53 percent, of the women family heads were in the labor force, and more than three-fifths of these women workers were the only earners in their families. About 1 out of 10 women workers was head of the family.

Nearly 3 out of 10 families (28 percent) headed by women had incomes below $3,000 in 1971. This was true for 4 out of 10 families headed by black women. More than one-fourth of all women family heads were black; the median income of such families in 1971 was $3,645, as compared with $5,842 for families headed by white women.

Mothers with husbands present.--Of the 19.2 million married women (husbands present) who were in the labor force in March 1972, 10.5 million had children under 18 years of age. About 3.2 million of these mothers were helping to support their children. Included were 593,000 mothers whose husbands had 1971 incomes below $3,000, 1 million whose husbands had incomes between $3,000 and $5,000, and 1.6 million whose husbands had incomes between $5,000 and $7,000.

Of the 3.7 million working wives with children under age 6, 1.5 million, or 39 percent, had husbands whose incomes were less than $7,000.

Wives whose husbands are unemployed or unable to work.--In the 45.8 million husband-wife families in March 1972, 1.3 million husbands who were in the labor force were unemployed and 6.6 million husbands were not in the labor force. Some 607,000 wives of unemployed husbands and nearly 1.5 million wives whose husbands were not in the labor force were working or seeking work. Many of these women were the sole support of their families.

Women whose husbands are employed in low-wage occupations.--In March 1972 there were 607,000 married working women whose husbands were farmworkers; another 768,000 had husbands who were nonfarm laborers; and 1.1 million had husbands employed in service occupations. The median wage or salary income of men in these three major occupation groups was low in 1971. Among farmworkers it was below the low-income level, and among nonfarm laborers it was barely above.

Note.--Figures are from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Data for minority races refer to all races other than white. Negroes constitute about 90 percent of all persons other than white in the United States. Spanish-origin persons are included in the white population.

GPO 864-381